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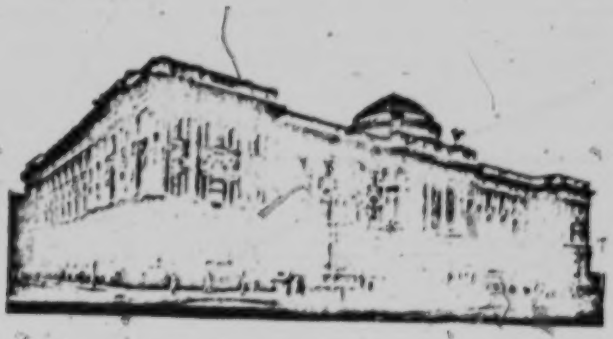

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A WINNEBAGO WAR-BUNDLE CEREMONY

By W. C. McKern*

182 796 The primitive religious ceremonies of the Winnebago Indians are not destined long to survive. Not only is the new generation forgetting or deliberately neglecting the traditions of the old order, due to the growing influence of encroaching white civilization, but the conversion [177 276] of many of the older members of the tribe to the Peyote faith has thinned the ranks of the Medicine Lodge to a marked extent. Many 795 of those responsible for introducing this new Christian cult among the Winnebago are still alive. Its unabated ascendency in the favor of the Indians is proportionate to the decline of ancient religious practices.

114 796 However, meetings of the old order still are held, and are in some measure successful, due largely to the fact that many of the Peyote

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Fig. 120.—Big Wave and his family standing before his house.
Fig. 121.—Medicine Lodge near Big Wave's home.
Fig. 122.—Framework of the War-bundle Ceremony lodge.
Fig. 123.—Big Wave making sacred fire, accompanied by his wife.

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people attend as a matter of courtesy, or to keep peace in the family. It was my good fortune to attend such a meeting, a war-bundle ceremony, in October, 1927. Mr. A. White, whose Indian name is *Tcus-tca-hc-de-ga* (Big Wave), figure 120, is custodian of the war-bundle of the Thunderbird clan of the Wisconsin Rapids band of Winnebago. Word came to me through his son-in-law, Mr. U. S. White of Milwaukee, that a war-bundle feast would be held shortly, and that I was specially invited to attend.

As Mr. White and his family also wished to make the trip, we drafted a Museum car into service and joined forces. In addition to Mr. White and his wife and two children, Mr. Alton Fisher was persuaded, without much difficulty, to join me in representing the Department of Anthropology.

We arrived at Wisconsin Rapids late at night, and were up early on the following morning and on our way to the site selected for the ceremony. Upon arriving at his home, we were courteously received by the custodian of the bundle, and privileged to meet his family and many others who were in the midst of preparations for the feast.

The regular war bundle ceremony of the Thunderbird clan is a feast and dance given in honor of various spirits, chiefly the Thunderbirds, who are the spiritual directors of war, and the Night Spirits. It is held in an oblong wigwam shaped like the medicine lodge of the Winnebago and neighboring Algonkin groups, figure 121, and similarly constructed of a frame-work of bent poles covered with birch bark or mats, or more recently with canvas or other cloth. Big Wave had directed the construction of the lodge for this particular ceremony in an area immediately adjoining his dwelling lodge, figure 122. The single door was placed at the end of the lodge, facing east.

The lodge was small, made so to accommodate the limited number expected to attend, and consequently it was decided to cook the feast over outside fires, an irregular, though not unusual procedure. Therefore, only a single fire was built in the lodge, centrally situated at the eastern end not more than three paces from the door. Since the fire was to be new, sacred fire, the ceremonial fire-making equipment from the war bundle was employed. This consisted of a flat, rectangular base of oak, nearly perforated in many places with charred drill holes, and a drilling element of softer wood. Big Wave himself officiated in the fire making, figure 123. Kneeling, he placed the basepiece between his knees, with tinder conveniently near. Then one end of the drill was fitted into one of the holes in the base, and the shaft was rapidly rotated between his hands. Soon smoke curled up from the point of friction. The bits of glowing wood dust so produced were quickly applied to the tinder and carefully blown to a small flame. Then light kindling was applied, followed by heavier sticks until the fire was be-

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yond the need of further nursing. Standing alone above this altar, Big Wave then offered, in his native tongue, a prayer to be carried upward by the fire to Creator. In a low voice he thanked Creator who taught the use of fire to the Indians, that it might live with them forever and watch over them. He expressed satisfaction that new fire had been started on this occasion, so that all present might enjoy the benefits of life. He described the fire as an interpreter, conveying to the spirit world the prayers of men. He then sprinkled tobacco upon the fire, saying: "This tobacco I offer you (the spirits) that you may do that which I ask of you, that you may grant to all here, our wives and children, and all our relatives, good fortune and all the benefits of life. This prayer is for others who will also give tobacco."

Later, when the meeting was convened and the guests filed into the ceremonial lodge, many silently sprinkled tobacco on the fire, thereby sharing the benefit of this prayer. This tobacco sacrifice is called, filling the spirits' pipe.

As soon as the new fire was burning well, coals were removed therefrom with which to start the cooking fires outside the lodge, for the feast must be cooked over sacred fire. Two short poles were placed on either side of the fire, topped by a crosspiece from which the pots were suspended on chains. Water was boiled, with which all the pots were thoroughly washed. Then the meat (fowl, beef and pork) was prepared for cooking. The fowls had to be singed over the sacred fire. A definite number of equal portions were placed in each pot, since each participating family was to share the contents of a single pot which, therefore, must contain a portion for every member of the invited group.

While the war-bundle owner's helpers, the waiters, selected from his paternal nephews when possible, were preparing the feast, he himself entered the lodge, took down the war-bundle from where it hung on the north wall opposite the fire and spread it out on the ground immediately west of the fire. Although much of the contents of the bundle appeared to be very old, the cover-piece was of cloth. The bundle was unrolled and spread out upon this rectangular piece of goods. The inner wrapper was of matting. Upon this a variety of fetishes and elements of ceremonial equipment was displayed. These included various bird skins, reed whistles and an old fire drill set which had long been out of use due to the fact that the base piece was entirely covered with holes, without interval, and as deep as the thickness of the piece would permit.

Two beaded snake-skin fetishes were suspended from the top of a peeled stake set up between the bundle and the fire. Adjoining this a sharpened stick, later to be used as a meat fork in distributing the meat, was placed, the handle thrust into the ground. Two fine old war clubs from the bundle were also placed between fire and bundle, their handles thrust into the ground. Two bowls, one containing tobacco and the

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796 other mixed tobacco and kinnikinnik, were respectively placed at the
778 northeast and southeast corners of the bundle.

A peeled stake, forked at the top, was set up at the central western margin of the bundle wrapper. The ceremonial pipe, of Siouan type [276] with a catlinite bowl, was then filled by the leader from the bowl of mixed tobacco and kinnikinnik and placed with the stem end resting in the fork of the stake, the stem slanting diagonally downward across the bundle and the bowl, in upright position, resting on the central eastern margin of the bundle wrapper.

[324 The leader then placed some live coals from the fire in a small stove-
783] shovel. On these coals he placed white cedar leaves. With the smoke of the burning cedar leaves he purified the contents of the bundle, his own person, and even the walls of the lodge.

796 Shortly before the ceremony was to start, some of the waiters pre-
534 pared the drum. What had probably been originally designed to serve as a pickle keg, served as the body of the drum. This was partly filled with water. A buckskin head was then placed over the open end and drawn taut by means of cords attached to the base of the body. This was done by means of stick tourniquets in each of the cords. The proper degree of tautness was determined by tipping the drum bottom side up, to permit the water to wet the drum head, and testing the tone quality with the drum stick. After the drum had been thus properly tuned, more hot coals were placed in the censer, cedar leaves applied and [783] the drum and stick turned over and over in the resulting smoke. Then the drum was placed just north of the war-bundle.

A small pot containing two portions of cooked meat was suspended from the roof of the house immediately west of the bundle.

796 Early in the afternoon, all preparations having been completed, the ceremony began. The guests in little groups filed into the lodge and were seated by the head waiter, squatting on mats with their backs to the wall. The most important guests, owners of war-bundles in other clans, [562] were placed nearest the door. The eastern two-thirds of the lodge was occupied by men only. The women were clustered at the western end. Mr. Fisher and I were seated immediately south of the bundle. The leader and three assistants, elected to serve as musicians, were grouped just north of the fireplace.

[182] Although the rites associated with the war-bundle are kept up by a few of these Winnebago, the ritual has sadly degenerated. Aside from the host, no man made any serious attempt to equip himself properly in costume. Many important elements were omitted such as the preliminary sweat bath ceremony, the sacrifice of white buckskins to the spirits, the dog sacrifice, and many minor details left out of the ceremonies attempted. When all were assembled, the leader opened the [537] ceremony with a speech to those assembled. The formal dignity of the speaker and the unhesitating flow of his words were impressive. He

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announced that he was about to give a feast in honor of Creator, all the spirits of the world above, all the spirits of the world below, and all those spirits who had appeared in dreams to any of those present. In this way, as determined by his grandfathers, should long life, and happiness, and health and success in warfare be assured to those participating. He cited the giving of tobacco to various spirits; the dedication of the cooking meat to various spirits. He called upon other custodians of war-bundles and their waiters, who might be present, to assist in the singing, speaking, and dancing. "O! O!", assented the custodians of other war-bundles who were present.

The drum was now placed before the leader, who passed it to one of his three musicians. The other two and the leader were equipped with gourd rattles. The leader then took a reed whistle and on it actually played a tune very like a bugle call. Three distinct notes were produced by varying the force with which he blew it. He then started a song, his eyes closed as if in prayer, his face stamped with serious devotion. His assistants joined in, to the accompaniment of drum and rattles. A short rest intervalled the completion of this song and the start of the next. Three other songs followed in like manner. All of this music was relatively slow in time and not designed to be accompanied by dancing. A fifth song, of like character, was accompanied by the leader's throwing several pinches of tobacco over the war-bundle.

The next musical contribution was a dancing song and all the men who so desired gathered about the war-bundle, selecting therefrom reed whistles, and danced in place while blowing the whistles. There being not enough whistles to go around, some took fetishes which they held reverently in their hands while dancing. At the same time, the women at the west end of the lodge rose and danced in place. With slight pauses between, four dance songs were so rendered. At the end of each song, the male dancers participated in a series of war whoops. Everyone present apparently experienced a keen delight in this. One old man, blind and so feeble that he could not rise to his feet without assistance, insisted on dancing, without moving from his allotted place by the wall, and added his quavering voice to feebly swell the volume of each battle cry.

When the set of dancing songs was finished, whistles and fetishes were replaced on the bundle and all took their allotted places. Then the leader again spoke, his voice at times quavering with emotion, practically repeating his first speech. Again the honored guests answered with, "O! O!".

The head waiter then took the pipe from its position over the war bundle, and carried it to the guest seated nearest the door on the south side. While this old man puffed, the waiter lit the contents of the bowl with a stick, placed beside the fireplace for that purpose and lighted

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796 from the sacred fire. When the pipe was well lit, the waiter carried
276 it to the next man, and so on, passing clockwise about the lodge. Each man puffed several times at the pipe before passing it on. The women
[562] were excluded from participating in this ceremony, as were the leader and his three musicians. The waiters did not actually participate in any part of the entire ceremony, other than in their official capacity.

Before the next song was started, the head waiter carefully cleaned out the pipe, refilled it and placed it again over the bundle. All the tobacco cleaned from the bowl was disposed of in the sacred fire.

This same procedure, from speech to pipe, was repeated four times, although each group of songs was different.

796 Two men were now selected, one representing that group of clans
615 comprising the upper world phratry, the other the lower world phratry.
264 They seated themselves in the center of the lodge with a wooden bowl between them. In this bowl were placed the two portions of meat from the pots suspended from the lodge ceiling. At a given signal, each began to devour his allotted share of the meat as rapidly as possible. The phratry whose side wins in this eating contest will have good luck when next it takes the warpath.

796 The leader then told the dream experience of the original bundle
787 holder and said a few words thanking all for their participation. One of the waiters then proceeded to replace the contents of the bundle, roll it up, tie it and place it against the wall just back of the leader.

796 It was now time for the war-bundle feast, which consisted solely of
574 meat boiled with a few beans. Each pot had been dedicated to a certain spirit or order of spirits, but since these were not materially present to do proper justice to the occasion, the honored guests had to represent them in receiving and disposing of the food. One pot was placed before each of these leaders, and the contents were distributed under his direction to the men of his party. Other meat was supplied for the women and children of the group which he represented. The chief honored guest received the pot dedicated to Creator. On such occasions, one must eat all that is set before him, since the food is consecrated.

574 It should be noted here that Mr. Fisher has certain marked tastes in
114 food. He is not particularly fond of meat of any kind, dislikes beef particularly and dislikes boiled beef the most of all. His predicament can well be imagined, therefore, when a large portion of boiled beef was placed before him with the understanding that none must be wasted. Fortunately, one may broadcast a call for outside help on such occasions without trespassing against the rules of the ceremony. Very piteously, then, did Fisher make his plea to me. Knowing that the night spirit dance with a vegetable feast was to follow, he promised to eat the greater share of the vegetables apportioned to us if I would agree to do double duty on the meat. Out of the kindness of my heart, and also because I prefer boiled beef to boiled dried squash, I agreed to do this. Nor did

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I permit him to forget his bargain when the squash was served later in 114
the day.

Big Wave did not participate in the feast, nor did he smoke cere- 796
monially or otherwise during the entire performance. During the feast 574
he sang several songs without drum. These were his war-bundle songs, obtained in a dream by the original owner of the bundle and descending to his successors.

The bones from the feast were gathered up by the waiters and placed in a single vessel. Tobacco was added to the bones, and the vessel taken out to a place where no people were in view and where no dogs could [792]
molest the contents. This was a sacrifice to Disease Giver.

After the meat had been entirely consumed, the leader announced 796
that they would now have night spirit dancing. An old bow and four arrows were brought out and planted in the floor to stand erect in a row just west of the fireplace, where the war-bundle had formerly been displayed. Big Wave appointed one to lead the dance. The dancers aligned themselves in single file on the south side of the lodge, facing west, and were led by the dance leader carrying the bow and arrows and blowing a reed whistle, followed by the other dancers. The singers began singing and the dancers circled several times about the lodge counter-clockwise. With short pauses between, several songs and dances were so executed. When the set of songs was finished, the bowl of [574]
tobacco dedicated to the use of the guests was then given by one of the waiters to the most honored guest. The head waiter lifted the stove shovel containing the remains of the burned cedar leaves and poured the contents in the fire. Then the singing was resumed and they danced once more about the fire, joyously.

When the singing stopped, the leader for this dance returned the whistle to Big Wave, and the latter, as soon as all were again seated, addressed his guests. He said that this was the way they worshipped the spirits of their fathers. He thanked those participating for their assistance in the singing and dancing and solicited their further help. So they should enjoy health, long life and success. Everyone responded [201]
with a series of confirmative "O's". The feast of boiled squash was now served. It was the duty of the waiters to eat any scraps left by [261]
the feasters, since food uneaten is considered an affront to the spirits to whom the food is dedicated.

The ceremonies described above were followed by a buffalo dance. It seems that the spirit of the buffalo was especially noted for his speed in running, and could imbue his devotees with his skill. Inasmuch as [825]
speed in running was of prime importance in primitive warfare, where [726]
the desired procedure was to come quickly upon the enemy, strike de- [535]
cisively and disappear from the scene, the buffalo dance is considered an altogether proper adjunct to the war-bundle ceremony, and regularly follows in.

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The shrine about which this ceremony centers is also a bundle, in this instance owned by one of the waiters, but not necessarily so. Its setting up followed a definite procedure. A small mound of sand was first heaped up on the grassy floor of the lodge. A wooden bowl was placed on the top center of the mound, and a tin bowl directly west of the mound. These were both filled with maple syrup. Four men placed handsful of tobacco at the base of each of the syrup containers. Then the bowl of syrup was removed from the mound, to be placed adjacent to the tin vessel, and from the open buffalo bundle a number of buffalo tail's were taken and placed upon the mound. Four small eagle feathers, dyed red, were inserted in the margins of the mound to point in the four cardinal directions.

The leader, accompanied by musicians with rattles and one drummer, then sang one set of four songs. A dance song followed, practically everyone present joining in the dance, forming in line behind the leader and circling the lodge in a counter-clockwise direction. All the men were in the forepart of the line; the women followed the men. As the line was forming, several of the men urged the humble subscriber to this account to join the dance. Never before having witnessed the particular performance, I was entirely ignorant of the correct procedure, but realizing that this was a common dance in which anyone could participate without special preparation or careful observance of conduct, I, to my downfall, consented. I joined the line where it was forming immediately in front of me. The dance started before I became aware of my embarassing position; for whereas all the other men were grouped to comprise the leading half of the line, I was far back in the formation, distantly removed from the other representatives of my sex —dancing with the squaws. The shouts of merriment arising from both the men and women satisfied me, however, that I had not committed the unpardonable sin. Nevertheless, as soon as it was convenient, I corrected the error of my position.

As the line passed the bowls of syrup, the dancers each drank of the contents; the men from one bowl, the women from the other. The singing and dancing was continued until all the syrup was gone. Finally, the wooden bowl having been replaced on the sand altar, the leader approached it on hands and knees, mimicking the grunts and actions of a buffalo. He then proceeded to butt the bowl with his head, turning it over.

Speeches by the leader and by other prominent men brought the ceremony to a close.

My general reactions to the performance were two-fold. In the first place, I could not but be impressed by the exalted fervor of the older participants; at times tears coursed down the cheeks of Big Wave as he sang the spirit songs of his ancestors, and other participants showed the effect of strong emotion. Secondly, I beheld the ancient

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faith of the Winnebago, shaken and undermined by a host of intruding creeds, making its last, feeble stand against the ruthless encroachment of the ideas of the all-conquering white foreigners.